Can you hear me? What is sound art?

Nicholas Gebhardt is saturated with SoundCulture in San Francisco

Over ten days in early April, SoundCulture, the third trans-Pacific festival of sonic art and sound practice took place in and around San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, Marin County, San Jose and Santa Cruz. While I haven't dealt with everything in the festival, I've tried to draw out some of the conceptual questions that emerged over what was a large and often diffuse event.

Events like SoundCulture, which capitalise on the massive expansion of both aesthetic theory, cultural analytics and technological invention, demonstrate the difficulty of locating (and organising) a specific concept of art in favour of a highly deregulated field of artistic production in which, ultimately, anything (and everything) goes. Hybridity was the dominant formula through which much of the work was rendered. Yet the attempt to draw together such apparently disparate elements as contemporary music, sculpture, screen-based art, sound design, radiophonic arts, performance, scientific research, philosophy and DJ culture into an argument about the encompassing nature of sound was bound to run into all sorts of conceptual, sensory and geographical problems.

That we are adrift among an infinite continuum of sounds is the underlying assumption circulating through a lot of musicology, cultural studies, historical studies and aesthetics. SoundCulture, as a combination of exhibitions, a symposium, performances, films, and radio broadcasts attempted to give a shape to this assumption, to propose a pedagogy of sound that rested on the idea. In light of this, several questions seemed consistently important. What could a pedagogy of sound do? What are its concepts? In what way could sound be understood as the material for art, for cultural analysis, for history and for thought? And how is this pedagogy different from musical thought?

After ten days of listening, of concentrated listening - to performances, to films, to talks, to radio - certain things became apparent: the appearance of sound is no longer tied to a concept of composition, but instead, resides in an endless process of remixing and sampling; the forms of sound are subject to a series of infinite electronic manipulations that increasingly combine what is heard with the object of our hearing; and the nature of sound is conditioned by the degree of our immersion in a given sound event. The sound event, in this case, was defined in the very process of amplification, through an infinite micrology or ecology of sounds that became the total amplitude or effect of the environment in which they were heard.

In this sense, composer Ron Kuivila's work at San Francisco's The Lab of *Parsable*, marked out a distinction between audibility and inaudibility based on localisation; that is, the distribution of frequencies in the space was dependent on where and when or how you were listening. Various electric charges become sonorous across a range of conductive materials (foil, wiring etc.) along with a surveillance system that tracks movement, as well as sunglasses suspended on wire that also track movement and pulse to 300bpm, and antennae that shake suspended keys whenever the sunglasses find someone moving in the room.

There was still, however, a movement or intensity between the various electrical timbres that set off qualitative shifts in the blocs of sound, that created

a sense of the duration of the work: loud sparks, a rising and falling hum, the metrical calculation of the beats, the shimmering wall, the incessant rattling or jingling of the keys, tones that combined to reconfigure the compositional plane around acts of currency, around degrees of motion that, ultimately, pushed it towards the moment of indeterminacy.

Another work which confronted similar problems of how to transform the materials of violence and oppression into a sensation, to give it an affective and perceptive form, was Nigel Helyer's *Silent Forest*, augmented since it was shown at the Annandale Galleries earlier this year. Helyer's attention to an extreme clarity of design (metallic, glass and copper surfaces) using all manner of scientific and military references (metallic structures, glass beakers, air raid sirens etc.) to develop a motif of cultural, vegetal and sonic silence amongst the traces of war and colonialism in Vietnam, produced an unsettling series of structures. The political contortions and the military invasions that have produced such violence were, however, smothered beneath the fetishism of the large, metallic and glass objects and a mystification of the work's sonorous plane.

Silent Forest's sheer surfaces and heightened attention to the detail of solid line overwhelmed the ambient noise and sounds coming from the speakers and ultimately led you back to the seductive power of the forces that have the technological and economic capacity to transform a forest into a biological war zone or turn an opera house into a military headquarters. The sounds had that eerie sense that air raid sirens never fail to produce (it's a fine line between affective sound and aural clich, a sound effect), but the other references to opera and forest sounds were lost in the size of the structures. Rather than creating the problem of silence as a potential limit of or relation to noise and organised sounds, the sonorities functioned more as a massive abstraction, a sound effect that disappeared into the formal properties of the design.

The tendency towards sound as an effect - of space, of a visual image, of informatics, of technology - dominated a lot of the festival's events. A concert at Mills College featured a range of musical performances that used live electronics and samples. The various compositions emphasised the problems facing composers and artists who use sound: how to find a way out of the potential chaos in a post-Cagean sound world. By opening music to all sounds, to all events, there's the possibility that in the end all you do is reproduce the same event over and over, or what is left is a sheer surface that prevents anything from happening at all.

The *Sheer Frost Orchestra*, an all-female electric guitar orchestra in which the guitars were laid end to end on a stage and then played using a range of movements generated by the glass bottoms of nail polish bottles, attempted to carve out a different musical cartography around the electric guitar. Different overtones are produced by the meeting of glass and string and the timbral variation is controlled by the players and the various bottle shapes. There was no consistency however, no attempt to extract from the guitar a different movement, a different affective force. Simplistic references in the program notes to overturning the iconography of the guitar failed to compensate for a musical plane that only ever worked in relation to the inventions of Jimmy Hendrix, Prince, Freddie Green etc. Its form was primarily reactive (performers responding to other performers) and depended on a nominal improvised quality that marked out its own impossibility very quickly.

Ikue Mori, famous for her work with the New York New Wave band DNA and her improvisations with John Zorn, Fred Frith and others at the Knitting Factory in the eighties, offered several pieces for drum machines. To play several drum machines requires an extraordinary invention along a musical plane. By itself, however, it was a display of sound effects, more like a demonstration of what a drum machine could do. The rest of the concert included more traditional

electronic compositions by John Bishoff, Kenneth Atchley, Maggi Payne and Chris Brown that pointed to the infinite potential for a non-chromatic sound field to become reified in space as a question of volume, and that collapsed the differentiation of the sonorous material into a projection of the matter in space as the essence of that space.

So we moved around the city, from electroacoustic music to plunderphonics and on to DJ culture. Mostly, sound was reduced to a representation of a soundscape, a sign of something else - a landscape, a reproductive force (hence the preference for sampling and mixing as method). It got to the point where all the sonic properties were dissolved into their environment, appeared as manifestations of that environment, and finally, acted as the aural limits of any/all space. The problem with this image of sound is that it sets in motion a logic of resemblance, either of perceptible forms (in the case of analogy) or of intelligible structures (in the case of digital processes) that pass from digitised analogy to amplified environment - a doubling up of nature and informatics based on a massive confusion of science and art where one is constantly trying to become the other; a movement which creates, in Deleuze's terms, neither sensation nor concept.

And yet, the concept of silence kept turning up everywhere despite the usual attempts to suppress it as the negative of environment, of space, of immersion, of life. Yuji Sone directly confronted this question in his work *What Is Sound Art?*, raising the problem of the translation, the movement between types of silence, between words that sound and sounds that mark out the systematic forms of cultural lexicon. Silence was internalised as a passing between things, the rhythmic relation between a type, a genus, a form, an image, and a people, rather than a point of entropy, a black hole into which sound slides when it is no longer heard (or, in this case, understood). Sone put an infinite series to work as each new mishearing / misunderstanding undermined the formal logic of intercultural or informatic exchange.

The compositional imperatives that run through an event like this, even as the connections to musical thought are twisted and shifted and confronted, mean that the question of what sound art is in relation to a presupposed culture of sound is continually turning back on the question of music itself (which seems to me to be of more importance and in a sense more interesting). The performance of *PHFFFT* by the Dutch composer Trimpin along with composer and musician Beth Custer produced a formidable consolidation of wind, of digital processes, of movement and of improvisation that demonstrated the necessity of a compositional plane that does more than reproduce the logic of communications technologies and the market. Trimpin's installation opened the elemental forces of the wind (through a collection of large pitched pipes, reeds, flutes, and whistles) to the forces of robotics (the computer), but in such a way as to create a consistency of harmonic relations that made the room spin even as the improvised lines of Beth Custer's bass clarinet and saxophone cut a melodic path through the tempered air flows.

Over the course of SoundCulture the power of indeterminacy and deregulation to dissolve distinctions, to render boundaries incomplete, to make of art simply an expression of life, made it difficult to move further than the vague categories of novelty, experience and freedom as the basis for an understanding of sound. More than anyone, Trimpin's installation and the performance with Beth Custer marked out an inventive phase for thinking about sound that moved away from sound as simply an effect of technological space or as the encompassing representation of a landscape. The difficulty for SoundCulture now lies in creating or inventing blocs or compounds of sensation that do more than replicate the laws of technology and the market, that break through the mould of those communications systems that place sound as both a sign of life and the end of thought.

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